

NIKOLA  
YONKOV  
VAPTSAROV

POEMS

COMMITTEE FOR SCIENCE, ART AND CULTURE





*John B. Kennedy*



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*Translated from the Bulgarian by*

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COMMITTEE FOR SCIENCE, ART AND CULTURE  
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## NIKOLA YONKOV VAPTSAROV

(1909 — 1942)

VAPTSAROV, Nikola (1909—42)—outstanding Bulgarian poet, Communist. Son of a Macedonian revolutionary. In 1932 graduated from a naval college, worked as mechanic on a steamship, stoker in a paper mill and on the railways. From his early years took an active part in political life, in 1931 joined the Communist Party. Was one of the first organisers of Bulgarian-Soviet societies in Bulgaria. From 1938 to 1941 led a Macedonian literary circle which fought against reactionary official literature. In 1941 edited the newspaper "Literary Critic". For his revolutionary activity Vaptsarov was several times arrested and exiled. During the years of fascism in Bulgaria was underground. On July 23, 1942, for his antifascist activity Vaptsarov was shot. A few hours before the execution he wrote a poem expressing his feelings of love for the people: "But in the storm we'll be with you,

My people, for we loved you so." The first collection of Vaptsarov's poems "Motor Songs" was published in 1941. The hero of his lyrical poetry is the worker fighting for radical change of the social order. In the cycle of poems about Spain Vaptsarov praises the heroism of the Republicans fighting for the liberation of their country. The social pointedness of Vaptsarov's poetry, rich in form, expressive and energetic, brings it close to the poetry of V. Mayakovsky. A passionate journalism, national colouring, sincerity and persuasive force in every line mark the poet's best poems ("History", "We Shall Build", "Spring", "Remembrance", "On Parting" etc.).

Works: Vaptsarov, N. Y., Selected Poems (Sofia, 1946); Selected Poems (2nd edition, Sofia, 1948).\*

(*Great Soviet Encyclopaedia, Second Edition, 1951, Volume 6, pp. 619-20*)

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\* In 1951 Selected Poems (3rd edition), Partizdat, Sofia, and in 1952 Selected Poems (4th edition), Union of Bulgarian Writers, Sofia, were published.





LYUDMIL STOYANOV  
*Academician*  
*Member of the World Peace Council*

## WREATH OF LAURELS

(for Nikola Yonkov Vaptsarov)

Thinking of Nikola Vaptsarov, I cannot help recalling the figure of the young Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca, who after his execution by the Spanish fascists became the banner of the antifascist struggle not only in Spain but throughout Latin America. So closely do these two poets resemble each other in their work and by their fate.

Yet barely ten years have elapsed since the fascist butchers pierced his heart and extinguished his noble, militant spirit. Barely ten years since Vaptsarov, condemned to death, wrote the moving words of farewell about the light that was departing and fearlessly took his stand by the execution wall.

Nikola Vaptsarov was born in the town of Bansko, in the family of a prominent Macedonian revolutionary, and from his earliest days was nurtured with the feeling of hatred of all oppression, until later, after a sound labour schooling at the Marine College at Varna and then as an engine technician in Sofia, he devoted himself entirely to tireless antifascist activity with pen and word, action and song.

I remember how quiet, untalkative and attentive he was when he came to see me, a few days before he fell into the butchers' hands, to arrange for the collection of funds — and how to buy quinine for the internees at Enikyoi. I had not seen him for a long time and so we talked until late.

Then I opened his collection of poems "Motor Songs" which had recently been published, and was convinced once more that he was a poet with a rare poetic gift, a clear and powerful talent. And he was still so young!

A worker himself, who had profoundly identified himself with the strivings of the working class, in his poetry he embraces images, feelings and thoughts taken from working class reality. But it is clear that precisely this reality is the true harmonious, human and moral life, where people are brothers and not wolves, where feelings are simple, truthful and desired — free from hypocrisy and greed.

I know my place in life  
And I shall not surrender in vain,  
I will honourably die as a worker,  
I will honourably die for freedom.

He felt that he spoke not just words. There was in him something of the drama of Hamlet, but he was a modern Hamlet. Events shook him like a young poplar but he had firm roots and indecision was alien to him. For he knew the power of evil, he knew the enemy who was not a ghost or a fiction but an oppressor of flesh and blood, a



butcher of freedom and of everything human in life. Of Hamlet's resignation: "To be, or not to be . . .", he bore in his heart the first half: "To be!"

And in these days, tell me,  
When the enemy encircle us,  
Is it a sin in the heart, tell me,  
Still to keep a corner for love?

An integral man. he fought for his place under the sun, fought also to keep his human dignity. And against precisely these natural strivings of his advanced the nightmare of reaction, which with all his tangible and intangible senses he felt to be real.

His personal grief and sorrow take quite a considerable place in his poetry. But they are always interwoven with his yearning for freedom and brotherhood. In one of his magnificent poems "Song of the Man" the hero says:

My fate is decided, I'll hang from the rope.  
But that's far from the end, I would say.  
For a life will arrive that is fairer than song,  
And more beautiful than a Spring day . . ."

All the rebellious emotion in Nikola Vaptsarov's poetry, all his wrath, daring and militant fire come from his love for his own folk, for working people, for the people and his land, for his beautiful stricken homeland.

With what pain he bears the thought that his homeland is a prey of beasts, that it does not belong to its children and he cannot call it his own:

This land, which I now tread,  
This land, which a Spring wind awakens,  
This land — is not my land,  
This land, if you please, is alien.

He did not remain alien to the stirring events of his time. In his "Songs for a Country" he lauded the struggle of the Spanish people, the sacrifices of the fighters of the International Brigade, the battle in front of Madrid. In these songs there beats a brotherly, responsive heart, which hints at his own dreams and anxieties — and perhaps Fernandes is none other than the poet himself. For slavery has one and the same forms, and the fight against oppression is one and the same everywhere.

And here again I am brought back to a comparison with Federico Garcia Lorca. Lorca was shot by the Spanish fascists. At the final session of the Second International Congress in Defence of Culture on July 18, 1937, in Paris, antifascist writers took an oath before his portrait not to cease from the struggle against world fascism until its final and utter defeat. This oath was not needed for Vaptsarov, he carried it in his blood. He was wholly a revolutionary, with him life and poetry, dream and reality mingled in a single aim: victory. He was unable to witness the end, but he knew that the end was near, and to him that was everything:

But to die, when the earth is beginning  
To shake off its slough of wrong,  
When millions are being reborn,  
Is a song, yes, that is a song!



# POEMS







## FAITH

Here am I — breathing,  
Working,  
Living  
And writing my poetry  
(My best to it giving).  
Life and I glower  
Across at each other  
And with it I struggle  
With all my power.

Life and I quarrel,  
But don't draw the moral  
That I despise it.  
No, just the opposite!  
Though I should perish,  
Life with its brutal  
Claws of steel  
Still would I cherish,  
Still would I cherish!

Suppose round my neck they tie fast  
The rope  
And they ask:  
"Would you like one more hour to live?"  
I would instantly cry:  
"Untie!  
Untie!  
Come, quickly untie  
The rope, you devils!"

For Life there is nothing  
I would not dare.  
I would fly  
A prototype plane in the sky,  
Climb into a roaring  
Rocket, exploring  
Alone  
In space  
Distant  
Planets.



Still would I feel  
 A joyous thrill  
 Gazing  
 Up  
 At the blue sky.  
 Still would I feel  
 A joyous thrill  
 To be alive,  
 To go on living.

But look, suppose  
 You took — how much? —  
 A single grain  
 From this my faith,  
 Then would I rage,  
 I would rage from pain  
 Like a panther  
 Pierced to the heart.

For what of me  
 Would there remain?  
 After the theft  
 I'd be distraught.  
 To put it plainly  
 And more directly —  
 After the theft  
 I would be nought.

Maybe you wish  
 You could erase  
 My faith  
 In happy days,  
 My faith  
 That tomorrow  
 Life will be finer,  
 Life will be wiser?

Pray, how will you smash it?  
 With bullets?  
 No! That is useless!  
 Stop! It's not worth it!

My faith has strong armour  
 In my sturdy breast  
 And bullets able to shatter  
 My faith  
 Do not exist,  
 Do not exist!





For your words  
                                   to pass over  
 The spaces between.

I shouted for years —  
 An eternity . . .  
 I gathered the others too shouted in chorus —  
 The factory,  
                           the machinery  
 And the man  
                           in the farthest  
   darkest corner.

This shout forged an alloy of steel  
 And we armoured our life with its plate.  
 Just try putting  
                                   a spoke in the wheel —  
 It's your own hand you'll break.

You, factory,  
 Still seek to blind us  
 With smoke and soot  
 Layer on layer.  
 In vain! For you teach us to struggle,  
 We'll bring  
 The sun  
 Down to us here.

So many toil-blackened faces  
 Under your tyranny smart,  
 But one heart within you tirelessly  
 Beats with a thousand hearts.



## REMEMBRANCE

I had a mate,  
A good mate too,  
But . . . he coughed in trouble.  
A stoker by trade,  
He carried the coal in a sack  
And threw out the ash  
On the night shift for twelve hours running.

I remember the eyes  
Of this mate of mine,  
How they thirstily drank  
Every ray  
Which chanced  
To pierce through the grime  
And reach our cage.

How swift was the birth  
Of his feverish thirst  
In Spring —  
When outside  
Leaves murmur  
And flocks  
Of birds  
Cross the sky.

I could feel  
The appeal in his eyes  
And the suffering,  
Painful suffering.  
So slight was the grace they desired —  
Till Spring,  
Till next Spring . . .

Spring came  
In her beauty,  
With sun,  
Warm air  
And roses.  
The clear sky  
Bore us  
The odour of violets.

But in us was darkness,  
Oppressive  
And burdensome prose.

But then  
Our life was upset.  
The boiler gave trouble,  
Suspiciously rumbled  
And stopped.  
I do not know why,  
But maybe because  
The other lad died.  
Perhaps I am wrong.  
Maybe the hungry  
Boiler desired  
Familiar hands  
To throw coal on the fire.  
Perhaps it was so.  
I do not know.  
But it seemed to me, he  
In his gabble and gasping  
Was plaintively asking:  
"Where has the other lad gone?"

He — the other lad — died.  
But look,  
Spring is outside.  
Far away  
The birds dart through the sky.  
But he'll see them no more.

Such a mate had I...  
A good mate too...  
But he coughed in trouble.  
A stoker by trade,  
He carried the coal in a sack  
And threw out the ash  
On the night shift for twelve hours running.



## DUEL

We have come to close grips,  
 You and I have locked hands.  
 From my heart the blood drips  
 And you weaken. What then?  
 One will be overthrown,  
 One will be beaten —  
 And you are the one.

So you doubt it? You don't feel afraid?  
 But I've planned every move to be made.  
 I'm putting my heart in the fight,  
 And you will be beaten —  
 Degenerate, venomous life.

It's not now that we're starting, you know.  
 Our duel began long ago.  
 Our duel with passion we've waged  
 For many long days.  
 For days we have locked  
 Our arms and wrists.  
 I'll never forget  
 Your brutal fist.

In the mine gas exploded.  
 The layers of coal

buried

Fifteen men below.

Buried

Fifteen

human

corpses.

One of them

was

I.

By the door of a slum

Lies

a smoking

gun,

While the corpse slowly freezes.

No shouting,

no din,

One bullet  
Then — dirt for the bin.  
It's as easy as that...  
No fighting,  
No passion for life,  
And no fuss.  
Don't you know  
Who it was?  
It  
was  
I.

On the rainwashed pavement  
the victim lies  
Shot dead from an ambush.  
The sky has been mined  
And will crash  
on the square.  
But the man  
lying there  
In the pool of blood  
Is my brother —  
A fire  
of hatred and love  
In his glassy stare.

The villain,  
the loathesome  
gunman  
Instantly  
vanished from sight.  
You remember the rogue?  
It  
was  
I.

But do you remember a child that died  
in Paris on the barricades,  
A child  
that died in battle  
With gory  
retrogression?  
The warm blood in his veins  
Grew slowly  
cold as steel,  
And then his lips were parted  
In a fleeting smile.  
But though his lips turned blue,



His eyes  
                   still burned with zeal,  
 As if his eyes were singing :  
 "Liberté chérie !"

The child  
                   lay there  
                                   shot —  
 In the chill grip of death.  
 Do you know  
 Who it was ?  
 It was I !,

Do you remember  
                                   an engine  
 With gay  
                   optimism  
 Piercing  
                   the fog  
 Where even the birds  
                                   do not dare  
 To descend  
                                   through the mist-laden air ?  
 An engine with wings  
 That cleave  
                                   the cold curtain  
 And change the earth's orbit,  
 With gasoline vapour's explosion  
 Clearing the way toward progress.  
 The engine which sings high above  
 Is the work of my hands,  
 And the song of the engine  
 Is blood of my heart.

The man whose shrewd eyes  
                                   were glued  
                                   to the wavering compass,  
 The man  
                   who had dared to defy  
 The cold northern frost  
                                   and the mist —  
 Do you know  
                   who it was ?  
 It was  
                   I.  
 I am here  
                   and there.  
                                   I am everywhere, —











For to me it's as sure as the dawn —  
With our heads we shall break up the ice.  
From the low dark horizon  
the sun —

Yes, our own  
bright  
sun  
will rise.

And though the strong light  
shrivel up

My wings, like a small butterfly,  
I never shall curse

nor complain,  
For I know all the same  
I shall die.

But to die, when  
the earth  
is beginning

To shake off  
its slough  
of wrong,

When millions are being reborn,  
Is a song,  
yes, that is a song!

## SONG OF THE MAN

We argued,  
                     a lady and I  
                                     on the topic:  
 "The man of our time".  
 The lady,  
                     a peevish, excitable lady  
 Impatiently stamped,  
                                     answered back,  
 Overwhelmed me with torrents  
                                     of muddled complaint  
 And a hailstorm of verbal  
                                     attack.  
 "Just a moment, — I said — Just a moment!  
   Look here . . ."  
 But she cut me short, taking offence:  
 "I beg you, stop talking.  
                                     I tell you — I hate man!  
 He doesn't deserve your defence.  
 "I read of a fellow  
                                     who took up a chopper  
 Against his own brother  
                                     and killed him.  
 Then washed  
                                     and attended a service at church,  
 And afterwards said he felt better."  
 I shuddered in horror, and felt none too bright.  
 But I'm not  
                                     very strong  
   in my theory,  
 So I quietly said,  
                                     as an honest man might:  
 "Let's make a test case of a story.  
 The case took place in a village, Mogila.  
 The father had hidden  
                                     some money.  
 The son got to know of it,  
   took it by force  
 And then did away with his father.  
 But after a month, or  
                                     was it a week,



The authorities made an arrest.  
But the court  
                    doesn't function to give men a treat,  
And sentenced the culprit to death.  
They duly conducted the villain  
                    to prison,  
They gave him a number and can,  
But there in the prison he met honest people,  
Became  
                    a real man.  
I don't know  
                    the leaven that stirred him,  
I don't know  
                    the way it was made.  
But a song  
                    much more clearly than talking  
Opened his eyes to his fate.  
And then he would say :  
                    "O my God, how I floundered !  
And here am I waiting  
                    to swing.  
When you're hungry  
                    and dizzy  
                    from hardship,  
You've only to make a false step and you sink.  
"You wait like a bull for the slaughter,  
Turn about, in your eyes there's  
                    the knife !  
How unjust,  
                    how unjust  
                    is world order !  
But perhaps we could better our life ... "  
He struck up his song, sang it quietly  
And slowly,  
                    in front of him  
                    life  
Floated forth like a wonderful vision ...  
He sang,  
                    fell asleep  
                    with a smile ...  
Outside in the passage  
                    they talk in a whisper.  
There follows a moment of calm.  
Then somebody cautiously opens the door.  
A few people. Behind them a guard.  
One of them  
Spoke

In a fearsome flat voice :

"Get up on your feet, man!" he bawled.

The others looked on,

with a vacant expression

Examined the dripping grey walls.

The man in the bed

understood that right now

Life had finished with him,

and at once

He leapt up and brushed off the sweat from his brow,

Stared back

like a wild staring ox.

But little by little

the man understood

That his fear was no use,

he would die.

And a curious radiance

lit up his soul.

"Shall we go now?" he asked them.

"All right."

He started

and they followed after him,

feeling

A curious

ominous chill.

The soldier thought :

"Let's get it over and done with !

You're in a tight corner now, pal.\*

## Outside in the passage

they talked in a whisper.

The corners were hidden in shade.

At last they came down to the courtyard.

Above it

The sky shone with breaking of day.

The man saw the dawn

and the brightening sky

Where a star in its brilliance bathed,

And fell to considering deeply his

grievous,

ferocious

and blind,

human

fate.

"My fate is decided,

I'll hang from the rope.

But that's far from the end,

I would say.





## SPAIN

What were you to me?

Nothing.

A land forgotten and remote,

A land of knights and high plateaux.

What were you to me?

The hearth

Where blazed a strange and cruel love,

A wild intoxicant

Of blood,

Of glinting blades

And serenades,

Of passion,

Jealousy

And psalms.

Now you are my destiny,

Now I live and share your fate.

In your struggle to be free

Wholly I participate.

Now I'm stirred, now I rejoice

At all your victories in the fight.

In your youth and strength I trust

And my own strength with yours unite.

Crouching in machine-gun nests

I fight on to victory,

Down among Toledo's streets,

On the outskirts of Madrid.

A worker in a cotton shirt

Torn by bullets near me lies.

Ceaselessly the warm blood streams

From the cap pulled o'er his eyes.

It is my blood that I feel humming

Through my veins, as suddenly

In him I recognise the friend

I once knew in a factory

Where we shovelled coal together,

Stoking the same furnace fire,



And found there was no barrier  
To check our young and bold desire.

Sleep, my comrade, sleep in peace!  
Though now the blood-red flag be furled,  
Your blood into mine will pass  
And stir the peoples of the world.

The blood you gave, already flows  
Through village, factory, town and state,  
Arouses, urges and inspires  
All working men to demonstrate

That workers never will lose heart,  
But will advance relentlessly,  
Determined both to work and fight  
And shed their blood that men be free.

Today your blood builds barricades,  
Infuses courage in our hearts,  
And with a reckless joy proclaims:  
"Madrid is ours!"

Madrid is ours!"

The world is ours! Friend, have no fear!  
The whole expanding universe  
Is ours!  
Beneath the southern sky  
Sleep

and have faith,

have faith in us!

## LETTER

Address :

Senora  
 Francesca Labore  
 HUESCA.

Mother,  
 Fernandes is killed !  
 Fernandes  
 Is dead and buried.  
 Fernandes  
 No longer lives.  
 Fernandes  
 Lies in the fields  
 On the outskirts  
 Of Madrid.

He was such a good man, tell me —  
 Why did they cut short his life ?  
 Though my Fernandes has perished  
 They shall still go out and fight.

Mother, there is only you  
 To whom I can my grief unfold.  
 You know how it is in war,  
 And how many tears do flow.

I look for signs of sympathy  
 In other women's eyes,  
 But there too I find bitter grief  
 And tears, fresh tears arise . . .

Perhaps it is a brother dead,  
 A loved one killed on duty,  
 Perhaps a piece of bursting shell  
 Has ravished youthful beauty.

Perhaps like me she's vainly hoping  
 And some news awaits,  
 But the moist earth already holds him  
 In her strong embrace . . .



Mother, you should not reproach him  
 That he went away to fight.  
 Now I even think that we  
 Were sinning. Fernandes was right.

He alone of us perceived  
 The single truth in life —  
 That it is best a man should die  
 Than live the life of beasts.

Bread we had. A single loaf  
 Was enough for two.  
 But for the son who will be born,  
 Mother, will it do?

And there's another thing — somehow  
 It's hard to understand.  
 They go and fight together. Why?  
 Is bread the only bond?

Today there was a funeral  
 For those trapped in a shelter.  
 With my own eyes I saw it all  
 But can't find words to tell you

How strange a sight it seemed to me,  
 How curious it was,  
 For on the people buried there  
 A wondrous radiance shone. —

I saw them only for an instant  
 In between the coffin planks,  
 Through the coffin boards I saw them  
 Stretching out their hands.

In their death they fuse together,  
 As one man they lie,  
 And the flames of happy death  
 Burn brightly in their eyes...

All at once I understood  
 He had to go to war.  
 Fernandes died in the battle —  
 I'll see him no more.

Mother, Fernandes has perished!  
 Mother, Fernandes has gone,  
 Fernandes is dead and buried!  
 Weep, because he died so young.

But to the old man say nothing! —  
Sorrow will be his undoing.  
Hide yourself somewhere, cry softly  
And say nothing, nothing.

If somehow he realises,  
If somehow he should suspect it,  
Say that both of us are well,  
And a baby is expected.

You may say to him: Dolores  
Is now learning fairy tales.  
She and Fernandes write asking  
Would you like a boy or girl.

To write you any more, dear mother,  
Would but cause me further sorrow.  
Greetings from your loving daughter,  
Dolores Maria Goya.



## GORKY

I worked in a factory  
 Under a low sooty sky,  
 Where life beat us down  
 With ironshod paws  
 And furrowed our brows  
 With hard toil.

What a struggle it was  
 To awaken  
 The life in those people,  
 To break up

the crusted

deposit

of lies,

that weighed

On their lives.

I worked in a factory  
 Under a low  
 sooty

sky;

Where life beat us down  
 And the days —

rusty nails —

Jammed our souls.

But then I remember, whenever we read

“In The Depths”

or

“Mother”,

The sun pierced

the grime

of the factory roof

and eyes shone.

And the people

In shabby back alleys and slums

Would scrape off the rust

from their thoughts

and be happy,

Be happy . . .

But this morning

Along came the stoker

And told me :

"Vaptsarov,

The steam

is expended."

I started and stared,

But he went off upstairs

much offended.

Then in rushed the blacksmith

And heatedly asked :

"Is it true, mate ? — he cried —

"Is it true

that the old man has died ?"

I froze, and with hatred,

Entirely unwarranted

hatred, said :

"Damn it, I tell you

To be more precise,

Yet here you come blathering !

Tell me, who's died ?"

He told me and I went outside.

For the engine-room air

prevented my breathing,

The engine-room

could not contain

my sorrow.

The engine-room

could not respond

to my feeling.

I heard the smith talking to somebody quietly :

"Brother, how well Gorky knew us,

Knew me, you and everyone else !

He'd put you in one of his books,

Say : "Don't move !" —

Then you'd read,

rub your eyes,

Know yourself.

"Now suppose

You've a child,

And he's reading

Or rather — discovering books.

You've no money.

Suppose

You've no money.



He says: "Yes, the child must study  
 Whatever his heart  
 May choose."

\*Suppose  
 You go home  
 With a heart full of pain  
 And a smarting soul,  
 And you vent all your rage on the wife.  
 He will lift up his head  
 And from under his brows  
 Look up  
 And enquire:  
 "So you've not enough money for bread?"

The other man listened  
 Enthralled.  
 For everything  
 Now seemed as clear  
 As if life  
                   had thrown open  
   its doors,  
 As if in his breast  
                   a hard lump of snow  
   had thawed.

He murmured,  
 Just audibly murmured:  
 "Now that's what I call a real man!"

## SPRING

My Spring, my white Spring,  
Still unlived, still unfêted!  
Still only a day-dream  
Skimming the poplars  
Not caring to stay here.

My Spring, my white Spring!  
You'll bring thunder, I know,  
Rain and hurricane too,  
To restore many hopes  
And to wash bloody wounds.

How the skylark shall sing  
As it soars high above us,  
Our work gladness bring,  
And all men be brothers!

My Spring, my white Spring,  
Let me see your first flight  
Call the dead squares to life!  
Let me but see your sun,  
And then —  
On your barricades die!



## WE SHALL BUILD

We'll build a plant, an enormous plant  
 With walls of concrete and steel!  
 Men and women,  
 We, the people,  
 Shall build a plant  
 Of life.

Our children die  
 In the poisonous stench  
 Of sunless  
 Suffocating slums.  
 The world is a prison.  
 Men and women,  
 People,  
 Not a step back!  
 We'll build a plant  
 Of life.

Our children die  
 In the choking stench,  
 With eyes that pine for the sun.  
 But we with heartless cowardice cringe  
 And say nothing, infamous nothing.  
 We have suspended the cables  
 Through which submissively flows —  
 Yes, our own blood flows through the pylon cables  
 Powering life.  
 But life sweeps and drags us along  
 While we gaze at it dumbly indifferent.  
 We've burrowed through rock with our nails,  
 Tunnels through granite we've driven.  
 We've girded the earth with steel rails,  
                                   in its bowels  
 There's nothing lies hidden.  
 Aerials pattern the sky,  
                                   where on high  
 Skyscraper summits are thrust  
                                   in mist,  
 And in space higher still  
 Roar the ravens of steel.

Comrades, let us be clear :  
I do not  
Brand-iron progress.  
I'm well aware  
That it is not progress that chokes us  
And we'll not destroy it.

We'll build a plant,  
An enormous plant  
With walls of concrete and steel !  
Men and women,  
We, the people,  
Shall build a plant  
For life !



## HISTORY

History, will you mention us  
In your faded scroll?  
We worked in factories, offices —  
Our names were not well-known.

We worked in fields, smelled strongly  
Of onions and sour bread.  
Through thick moustaches angrily  
We cursed the life we led.

Will you at least be grateful  
We fattened you with news,  
And slaked your thirst so richly  
With the blood of slaughtered crowds?

You'll view the panorama,  
O'erlook the living centre,  
And no one will remember  
The simple human drama.

The poets will be distracted  
With pamphlets, progress rates;  
Our unrecorded suffering  
Will roam alone in space.

Was it a life worth noting,  
A life worth digging up?  
Unearthed, it reeks of poison,  
Tastes bitter in the cup.

We were born along the hedgerows.  
In the shelter of stray thorns  
Our mothers lay perspiring,  
Their dry lips tightly drawn.

We died like flies in autumn.  
The women mourned the dead,  
Turned their lament to singing —  
But only the wild grass heard.

We who survived our brothers,  
Sweated from every pore,

Took any job that offered,  
Toiled as the oxen do.

At home our fathers taught us :  
"So shall it always be."  
But we scowled back and spat on  
Their fool's philosophy.

We kicked the table over,  
Ran out of doors, and there  
In the open felt the stirring  
Of something bright and fair.

How anxiously we waited  
In little-known cafés,  
And turned in late at night  
With the last communiqués!

How we were soothed by hoping!...  
But leaden skies pressed lower,  
The scorching wind hissed viciously...  
Till we could stand no more!

But in your endless volumes  
Beneath each letter and line  
Our pain will leer forbiddingly  
And raise a bitter cry.

For life, showing no mercy,  
With heavy brutish paw  
Battered our hungry faces.  
That's why our tongue is raw.

That's why the poems I'm writing  
In hours I steal from sleep,  
Have not the grace of perfume  
But brief and scowling beat.

For the hardship and affliction  
We do not seek rewards,  
Nor do we want our pictures  
In the calendar of years.

But tell our story simply  
To those we shall not see,  
Tell those who will replace us —  
We fought courageously.



## CINEMA

There's a crowd at the door  
 Where the floodlit posters  
 Proudly  
 Announce :  
 "A Human Drama".  
 There's a crowd at the door  
 And the King's nickel horseman  
 Sweats  
 In the pressure  
 Of my palm.

On the square white screen  
 In the darkened hall  
 The Metro lion  
 Sleepily yawns.  
 Suddenly a road  
 And a forest appear,  
 And above — the blue sky.  
 Expansive, clear.

Meeting at the bend  
 Two sleek limousines  
 Collide.  
 It's our hero  
 And heroine.

Promptly the gentleman  
 Leaves his car,  
 Picks up the woman  
 In tough steel arms.  
 Slowly she opens  
 Eyes that smoulder,  
 Flutters her lashes  
 And skyward stares.  
 O what a beautiful  
 Thoroughbred mare!

Nightingales, sure enough,  
 Sing in the trees  
 Where the peaceful azure  
 Filters down through the leaves,

And yonder  
The soft green meadow  
Allures.

Lustfully greasy  
John kisses Greta.  
Lascivious lips  
Start slobbering . . .  
STOP IT!  
Where is our fate here?  
Where is the drama?  
Where am I? Tell me!  
Ready to shoot, the explosive time  
Presses a gun against our spine.

In our love  
In our grief  
Can we be so naive  
With our chests full of smoke  
And our lungs T.B.?

Do we meet  
Those we love  
In a sleek  
Limousine?

Our love arises  
At work —  
Amid smoke,  
Amid soot  
And machines.

Then comes the grey life,  
The struggle for bread,  
The vague dreams —  
Every night in the cheap narrow bed  
We barely perceptibly weaken and die.

That's how it is.  
And there is the drama!  
Everything else —  
Is a lie!



## COUNTRY CHRONICLE

A man on the radio  
 Hotly debates.  
 With whom?  
 I don't know,  
 But perhaps — with the people.  
 Let the man talk,  
 Isn't that what he's paid for!

"The power of the state  
 And state authority  
 Stand by ready  
 To guard your interests.  
 Down with slogans!  
 Drop your banners!  
 Everyone's satisfied,  
 Sated,  
 Happy."

A man in the coffee-shop  
 Spits in disgust,  
 Treads the gob firmly  
 Into the dust,  
 Looks round, says with a prudent nod:  
 "They think they can trick us,  
 The sons of bitches!  
 But has 't God written  
 In Holy Scripture —  
 The voice of the people is the voice of God?"

"You're right!"  
 Said a hungry  
 Shivering youth.  
 "Wasn't that the lie  
 They told you then  
 In nineteen hundred  
 And fifteen?"

"But today  
 If they ask us to die,  
 If they force us to face  
 Bullet fire,

Even fools will agree  
That it's high time  
We  
Had our say.

"And here's my belief,  
For our bread  
Is blacker than grief,  
And the oil jar  
Is empty:  
We've only one slogan —  
Down with the terror!  
Ally with the U.S.S.R.!"



## ON PARTING

*To my wife*

Sometimes I'll come when you're asleep,  
An unexpected visitor.  
Don't leave me outside in the street,  
Don't bar the door!

I'll enter quietly, softly sit  
And gaze upon you in the dark.  
Then, when my eyes have gazed their fill,  
I'll kiss you and depart.

\* \* \*

The fight is hard and pitiless.  
The fight is epic, as they say.  
I fell. Another takes my place —  
Why single out a name?

After the firing squad — the worms.  
Thus does the simple logic go.  
But in the storm we'll be with you,  
My people, for we loved you so.

*2 p. m. — 23. VII. 1942*



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